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# Dancing with the Trickster

## Notes for a Transpersonal Autobiography

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This autobiographical essay focuses on “transpersonal,” “anomalous,” and “exceptional” experiences, those elements often ignored when individuals write the stories of their lives. Nevertheless, these experiences have life-transformative potentials that may be more salient than the activities usually serving as the basis for autobiographical accounts.

*If you want to face the Great One,  
you have to learn to dance in both directions.*

—Sufi saying

UNUSUAL EXPERIENCES are usually omitted from autobiographies, and yet they are often among the most important of one's life (White, 1999). Many people are reticent about revealing these experiences for fear that they will be called deluded, sick, debased, or even fraudulent. Nevertheless, as the result of an invitation from the editors of this journal, I am willing to take the risk, hoping to encourage others to share their own transpersonal and anomalous experiences. I believe that when people share these experiences, they are participating in a process of cognitive and emotional liberation; those who write these autobiographies provide validation for others who have traversed similar times and spaces. Because I might expand upon this essay in the future, I am subtitling it “Notes for a Transpersonal Autobiography.” At their worst, autobiographies that deal with these issues could lapse into solipsism and narcissism. But at their best, these autobiographies could add to the data necessary for describing the human being capable of coping with contemporary crises, integrating shattered cultures, and helping communities provide support services. Toward this end, my modest

contribution describes life episodes that I consider “transpersonal” and/or “anomalous” and/or “exceptional human experiences.”

When I was fourteen years of age, I desperately wanted an encyclopedia. My aunt was a salesperson for *The World Book Encyclopedia*, and could have sold a set to me at a reduced rate. However, my parents, who ran an orchard in southern Wisconsin, explained that we simply could not afford this luxury because the weather conditions over the past year had not been favorable for a bumper crop of apples, our chief source of income. I went to my room and began to cry, then realized that I had an uncle who was fairly well-to-do. I stopped crying and speculated about how I would make my appeal to Uncle Max. Suddenly, I bolted upright in my bed. My psyche swelled and my mind expanded in every direction. I suddenly knew what I was not supposed to know: Uncle Max could not be depended upon because he was dead. At that moment, the telephone rang. My mother answered the phone and, between sobs, told us that my cousin had just called. Uncle Max had been taken ill, was rushed to the hospital, and died shortly after his arrival. This was my first anomalous experience.

As a university student, as I read books and magazines, I learned that a small group of researchers referred to as “parapsychologists” had been studying these types of experiences

since the late 1800s. I also learned that anomalous information of this type often appeared in altered states of consciousness—emotional states such as my own when I was a child—but also in dreams, while drugged, or following hypnotic induction or some other external manipulation. Such information may also emerge during one's everyday activities, often as a hunch or a "gut feeling," or during shifts of attention, when one notices the beauty of a sunrise or is captivated by the antics of a household pet.

Some years after my presumptive premonition, I attended a summer youth camp in a beautiful Wisconsin state park. I had the opportunity to climb a forest ranger's tower, and I was eager to give it a try. I had suffered from severe acrophobia all my life and thought the climb might provide a quick cure. I simply didn't look down, and once at the top, I found it hard to believe that I hadn't fainted or panicked along the way. I needed some solitude after this intense experience; walking through the woods, I almost stumbled over a peaceful fawn resting on the grass. Our eyes locked, and for just an instant I felt that we were one organism. There was no fear, no apprehension, and no cause for alarm. We were simply two parts of the same biome, two aspects of the natural environment whose paths had crossed. Decades later, I realized that this had been my first transpersonal experience.

### **Anomalous and Transpersonal Experiences**

MANY SCHOLARS have attempted to define the term "transpersonal," but I am drawn to Charles Laughlin's (1994) definition: "Transpersonal experiences are those experiences that bring the cognized self into question" (p. 7). I like this statement because it implies that whether or not an experience is "transpersonal" depends on the state of the experient's cognitive maturity and/or self-knowledge; what may be a transpersonal experience in one culture might not be considered so in another. Lucid dreaming, for example, may be a transpersonal experience for an experient from the United States, but not for an Australian aborigine who has grown up to understand that Dream Time is the ultimate reality (p. 7).

My own definition of "transpersonal studies" echoes and extends Laughlin's construct. For me, the term refers to disciplined inquiry into human experiences in which an individual's sense of identity extends beyond its ordinary limits to encompass wider, broader, or deeper aspects of life (Krippner, 1998, p. ix). Simply put, one's sense of identity is extended beyond its ordinary limits, giving one the impression that "reality" has been encountered more completely. "Transpersonal psychology" is one of several branches of transpersonal study, and (unlike some of them) this inquiry is informed by the disciplined inquiry of scientific theory and method. To its adherents, transpersonal psychology is a paradigm that attempts to encompass and integrate the entire range of human activity, from the most sublime to the most pathological (Edwards, 2000, p. 239).

In this regard, I have been influenced by William James' call for "radical empiricism" in psychology. James (1912/1976) wrote, "To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced" (p. 22). For me, James' radical empiricism offers a useful framework for transpersonal psychology and the study of anomalous phenomena, a framework that is requisite if researchers intend to become serious players in the game of science. On the other hand, science is not the only game in town. There are other epistemologies, "ways of knowing" relying on the body, on feelings, on intuition, and on transpersonal and anomalous experiences, that are capable of taking us to realms that mainstream science has yet to acknowledge, much less to appreciate.

Anomalous experiences, from my perspective, are uncommon and/or inexplicable episodes in one's life (Cardena, Lynn, & Krippner, 2000, p. 4). According to R. A. White and S. V. Brown (in press), "the anomalous experience, whether it be perceptual, cognitive, or behavioral, originates outside the mainstream of the experienter's [or experient's] ordinary conscious awareness or self-concept." White (1997) has identified nine general classes of so-called "anomalous," "transpersonal," and "exceptional human experiences." They are called Death Related, Desolation/Nadir, Dissociative, Encounter, Exceptional Human Performance/Feats, Healing, Mystical, Peak, and

Psychical Experiences. As students at the University of Wisconsin in the 1950s, while hearing a recital by the great Chilean pianist, Claudio Arrau, a friend of mine and I had what I would now call “anomalies of personal experience of the peak experience type.” I had never been “caught up” in music so intensely; my friend imagined that she was running toward the stage and prostrating herself at Arrau’s feet! Other people in the audience might not have been so moved, but for the two of us the musical performance was uncommon and inexplicable in terms of our frames of reference at that time. From my perspective, many transpersonal experiences can be termed “anomalous” because they bring the cognized self into question. However, most anomalous experiences are not transpersonal; they may bring the experient’s worldview into question (e.g., when someone who doubts the evidence for precognition has a dream that comes true) but leave the sense of identity fairly intact.

### Exceptional Human Experiences

**B**OTH ANOMALOUS and transpersonal experiences are exceptional because they “stand out from,” or “rise above,” ordinary experiences. When an exceptional experience, which may be anomalous, transpersonal, neither, or both, changes the experient’s worldview and that person’s subsequent attitudes, behavior, or actions, it can be described as what White and Brown (in press) would refer to as an “exceptional human experience” (EHE), an umbrella term to cover those exceptional experiences from which experients have been able to potentiate themselves, sometimes without consciously realizing it, and sometimes after long work and hard effort—not always devoid of risks. Usually this realization results in a transformed identity, lifeview, lifeway, and/or worldview of the experient, at which point the exceptional experience becomes an EHE. The changes are in the direction of realizing and actualizing the experient’s full human potential. Our anomalous personal experiences during the Arrau concert were the first-of-their-kind for us; they could be considered exceptional experiences, but would not qualify as EHEs because they did not have life-transforming effects. For an exceptional experience to become an EHE it would have to be

special, meaningful, out-of-the-ordinary, genuine, and transformative, leaving the experient “more fully human” (White, 1997, p. 96).

White (1997) is especially interested in those anomalous experiences that become transpersonal once their meaning is integrated in ways that result in a transpersonal reorientation. Suzanne V. Brown (2000) has formulated White’s (and her own) concepts into a research model of the EHE process consisting of five stages. White considers her work to be an aspect of transpersonal studies, an appropriate designation because her mentor, Gardner Murphy (1949), was one of the first psychologists to use the term “transpersonal.” Even beyond Murphy, White’s favorite psychologist was William James, in effect a pioneer of transpersonal psychology, especially in regard to his concept of what he called the human self’s “more,” James’ term for the heights and depths that transcend one’s ordinary identity. For White, beyond even James there was Carl Jung, who also used the term “transpersonal,” and utilized a capital “S” for the “self beyond ego.” Jung’s description of “individuation” resembles what White refers to as the EHE process.

Many psychological theorists have emphasized the importance of meaning and purpose as fundamental aspects of human functioning. Their number includes such friends of mine as Abraham Maslow (who wrote about “peak experiences” and “self-actualization,” 1968), Carl Rogers (who discussed the “fully functioning person,” 1961), Viktor Frankl (who emphasized the “will to meaning,” 1992), and Charlotte Buhler and Fred Massarik (who described the “basic life tendencies,” 1968).

### Music to Eat Mushrooms By

**I**N 1954, I read an article in *Life* magazine by Gordon Wasson and was fascinated by his accounts of the Mazatec shaman María Sabina. Following the dictates of a dream, which she felt presaged Wasson’s arrival, doña María allowed him to participate in an evening ritual featuring the region’s sacred, mind-altering mushrooms. At that time, I had no idea that in the years to come, I would be invited to Harvard in 1971 for the presentation of Wasson’s book *Soma* (1971), or that, in 1980, I would participate in an expedition



to Oaxaca, Mexico, where I would meet doña María, perhaps conducting the last interview of her challenging but incredible life. The active ingredient of the sacred mushrooms, which she called *los hongitos* ("the little ones"), and one variety of which mycologists call *Psilocybe mexicana*, was synthesized into a drug named "psilocybin." A supply fell into the hands of the Harvard psychologist Timothy Leary in the late 1950s, ostensibly as a psychotherapeutic agent for use in research.

In August, 1961, I attended a symposium at the American Psychological Association featuring Frank Barron, William Burroughs, Gerald Heard, and Timothy Leary. After hearing them discuss psilocybin and other mind-altering drugs, I recalled Wasson's adventure and wrote Leary a letter volunteering to participate in his experiments. In April, 1962, I arrived at Harvard University to participate in a psilocybin session. Leary invited me to a party in honor of the philosopher Alan Watts, a visiting scholar at Harvard at that time. I ate something at the party that caused me to spend the night vomiting and retching. I was so weak the following morning that I had to lean on my friend Steve on my way to Leary's office. I arrived early, collapsed into a chair, and comported myself as best I could when Leary's assistants interviewed me. As soon as they left, I ran to the bathroom, but I was determined to follow through with the evening's session.

Just as soon as the psilocybin started to take effect, my malaise disappeared. Leary turned Steve and me over to his assistants and left for a crucial meeting with state medical officials. Half an hour later, I closed my eyes, seeing a kaleidoscopic vision of colorful shapes and swirls, including a humongous mushroom. A spiral of numbers, letters, and words blew away in a cyclone, stripping me of the verbal and numerical symbols by which I had constructed my world. I ate an apple, smelled spices in the kitchen, felt the fabric of the carpet, and touched the breasts of my indulgent guide Sarah. The recordings of Beethoven and Mussorgsky had never sounded better, and I seemed to be surrounded by chords and tones. The clock on the mantel seemed to be a work from a Cellini studio. I visualized delicate Persian miniatures and arabesques. I was in the court of Kublai Khan; inside a Buckminster Fuller geodesic dome; at Versailles with Benjamin

Franklin; and danced flamenco with gypsies in Spain, one of whom threw roses into the air which exploded like firecrackers. I was with Thomas Jefferson at Monticello; I watched Edgar Allen Poe write poetry in Baltimore. Suddenly, I was at the White House gazing at a bust of Abraham Lincoln; someone whispered, "The President has been shot," and Lincoln's visage was replaced by that of John Kennedy. I did not realize that this tragic vision would be actualized less than two years later.

My eyes were filled with tears, and I visualized a turbulent sea; Steve, Sarah, and our other guide were with me on a small raft, trying to remain afloat. We came upon a gigantic, dark-skinned figure, standing bare-chested and waist-deep in the churning waters. His countenance was graced with a sad smile. He exuded love, compassion, and concern, but could not offer us security. We sensed that this was the face of God, the body of our Creator, and for an instant, we were all one. I received the impression that if we, as humans, expressed love, compassion, and concern in our daily lives, we could partake of divinity. And as abruptly as the experience began, it was over.

For a few moments, this experience was transpersonal. However, most of the experience falls into the category that Robert Masters and Jean Houston (1968) refer to as "religious." In the religious experience, one has the conviction that one has encountered God, the Goddess, Fundamental Reality, or the Ground of Being. The transpersonal experience is referred to by Masters and Houston as that of "mystical union" (p. 100). Strictly speaking, those religious experiences during which one's identity remains intact are not transpersonal. Those writers who construct "hierarchies" place mystical and transpersonal experiences in a higher category than those that are simply "religious." Even though there are data linking religious and spiritual experiences with health and longevity (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001, p. 440), I know of no existing research supporting the efficacy of one *type* of experience over the other in promoting such benefits.

Was my psilocybin experience anomalous in the same way as my awareness of Uncle Max's death? Despite my insight concerning the limitations of words, I wrote an account of my

experience and distributed it to several friends. When Kennedy was assassinated, some of them suggested that I was a seer. However, I had known beforehand of a strange historical pattern, the fact that presidents elected at twenty-year intervals die in office, and this may have impacted (or even produced) my distressing psilocybin image (Krippner, 1967). Anomalous or not, my be-mushroomed evening was an EHE because I never forgot the insight I had gained. From that time on, I have never taken words as seriously or listened to music in quite the same way again. And ever since, I have savored the concept of a God who is compassionate, but not necessarily all-powerful and omniscient.

### The Role of Relationships

IN HIS provocative book, *The Beaten Path*, Ptolemy Tompkins (2001) laments that none of the adults, both in and out of his family, whom he encountered in his “search for truth” were fully instructive. Fortunately, his own inner resources proved to be more helpful than an external guru. Tompkins observes that in former times, no young member of a tribal society would have to look very far for answers to the question: “What is the meaning of life?” The culture’s mythological system would contain the answers, and would be able to explain every aspect of the youth’s existence in its own terms. But David Feinstein and I, in our books and articles on “personal mythology,” pointed out that the world’s great cultural mythologies are now so badly damaged and challenged that individuals need to create their own worldviews and paradigms for living (Feinstein & Krippner, 1997).

The 11th of September 2001 attack on the United States jolted people whose personal mythology held that “Life is predictable, fair, and understandable.” This worldview is no longer viable, if it ever was. At times like these, a re-reading of the *Book of Job* is instructive. When Job, the very model of piety, loses his health, his wealth, and his children, he asks God, “Why me?” God answers Job “out of the whirlwind,” telling Job that he “darkens counsel by words without knowledge,” and asking him, “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding.” Finally Job admits, “I have uttered what I did not understand.” I

review this awe-inspiring text whenever I am tempted to whine that “life is unfair” or complain that life should be predictable and comprehensible.

I seem to have had better luck than Tompkins, especially in regard to family members and spiritual teachers. Aside from giving eternal thanks to my supportive parents and my sister (and her family), I will avoid copying the Academy Award winner who rattles off appreciation after appreciation until silenced by the orchestra. Nonetheless, a sampling of my cherished relationships must include Swami Sivananda Radha and Tara Singh.

Initiated in Rishikesh, India, in 1956, Radha was the first Western woman to become a swami. Starting with no financial base or institutional support, she founded a string of “Radha Houses” in Canada, Mexico, the United States, and Western Europe. She considered transpersonal experiences, although extremely rare, to be expressions of a “love affair with the Divine.”

As a young woman, Radha (then known as Sylvia Hellman) made a mark for herself as a dancer in Germany, but the death of her husband sent her on a spiritual quest to India, where she studied with a number of spiritual masters. Her knowledge was so vast that her many admirers wanted to disseminate her books (e.g., Radha, 1978, 1994). One of them speculated that if Radha had a doctorate, this would add luster to her name and win her a new audience. She asked me to serve on her doctoral committee at Union Institute and I gladly agreed, even though I suspected that the addition of a few letters after her name would not propel her to the ranks of best-selling authors. Nevertheless, the date for the initial committee meeting was agreed upon, and I waited in my San Francisco office for her chauffeur to pick me up. He had become terribly confused, thinking that someone else would bring me to the meeting. Without my participation, the meeting was cancelled, and along with it the plans for Radha’s doctorate. I felt dreadful, blaming myself for not checking with her group during the week regarding arrangements for the meeting. Radha was very gracious, and absolved me of responsibility—a lesson that I hope I have been able to emulate whenever I am tempted to “blame” someone for a botched performance.

But I needed to learn the lesson once more. During the winter of 1992, I received a telephone call from Radha, seriously ill with arthritis, and living in Washington. She invited me to see her, and I made arrangements to do so after a Seattle conference that was to be held in January. I should have made a special trip, because Radha died shortly after our conversation. Her comment that she and I thought "very much alike" was a marvelous compliment. Once again, no blame was placed on me for not making this final assignation. In the meantime, I treasure the White Tara painting she gave me, and turn to it when I need access to my deepest wisdom.

Another remarkable relationship began when I met Tara Singh at Virginia Beach, home of the Association for Research and Enlightenment, where Edgar Cayce's work is carried on. Singh was born in India and came to the United States following the Second World War. I always enjoyed his stories about the time spent with Jawaharal Nehru, J. Krishnamurti, and Eleanor Roosevelt, whom I had hosted in 1953 as a student at the University of Wisconsin. An inspired teacher of the lessons gleaned from *A Course in Miracles*, "Taraji" (as he enjoyed being called) frequently cited the advice of our mutual friend, Helen Schucman. Helen, a psychologist, became the "scribe" for these inspirational volumes and often counseled, "The course is to be lived, not to be learned" (Singh, 1986).

I attended some of Taraji's retreats, and appreciated his attempts to bring participants "into the silence." Contemporary Western civilization, with its mania for progress and self-improvement, allows little time for moments of quietness and stillness, where people can reflect, contemplate, or simply experience who they actually are. For Taraji, the most important gift in one's life is silence, but "we must come to silence without desire and wanting" (p. 96). I could see why these retreats were well attended, leaving many participants eager to return the following year.

I attended one of these retreats at Asilomar, on the California Pacific coast. During the final day, there was a question and answer session. Much to my surprise, Taraji invited me to sit on the dais with him and turned the bulk of the inquiries over to me. It was out of character for me to give people spiritual advice, but I valued

Taraji's confidence. For over an hour I responded, giving examples from my own life whenever I could. For example, I related how one of the course's 365 lessons asked its students to thank those people who had persecuted or maligned them. In my case, the energy spent generating antipathy and anger could find better directions, once I substituted forgiveness for resentment, and moved on with my life.

The final question was actually a statement from a "born again" Christian who made an arousing declaration of what it meant to have Jesus in his life. The only response that came to my lips was, "Well then, there you have it!" And with that, Taraji closed the session and we adjourned for lunch.

My most memorable interactions with Swami Radha and Tara Singh were neither anomalous nor transpersonal. Indeed, these were "anomalies of personal experience" that were exceptional to me personally, although they might not have been to others. Nonetheless, as White (1997) points out, these experiences have a remarkable and unforgettable effect on the individual and carry the EHE process forward over the course of a lifetime, deepening, heightening, and enlivening the experient. These interpersonal activities, and dozens like them, were important markers on my spiritual path.

Sometimes these memorable encounters were very brief. Following one of my workshops on the topic of "personal mythology" at Palas Athena, in São Paulo, Brazil, my hosts scheduled an afternoon of dialogue with Thrangu Rinpoche, a visiting Tibetan lama, and his entourage. When it came my turn to ask questions, I asked the lama, "Why is it that so many articulate spiritual leaders fall prey to financial or sexual excess, or become alcoholics or drug addicts?" The lama replied, "It is easier to preach the dharma than to live the dharma; a humble monk in a remote monastery may live a life that is far more spiritual than a celebrated guru who appears on television and has written many books." This was a lesson that has remained close to my heart.

### Sweating in Nevada

THERE IS a controversy among anthropologists about whether shamanic traditions that favor mind-altering plants are "inferior" or "superior"



to those that do not use drugs. I have never found this distinction useful or accurate. My criterion is based on the biblical injunction, "By their fruits, you will know them." The use of mind-altering plants stretches back over the millennia, and thus cannot be considered a "degenerate" form of shamanism from a historical perspective.

I had the opportunity to participate in a powerful mind-altering ritual in 1974 during my first visit to the home of Rolling Thunder, an intertribal medicine man who lived in Carlin, Nevada. When I boarded the connecting flight that was to take me to Nevada, I was surprised to see the actress Corinne Calvet on board. She knew of my plans and had decided to join me, hoping that Rolling Thunder would agree to work on an annoying intestinal ailment of hers that had baffled half a dozen Hollywood doctors. Once we arrived, I introduced Corinne to Rolling Thunder and his wife, Spotted Fawn, who had seen one of Corinne's films on television the night before. Rolling Thunder considered this coincidence a "sign" that he was to work on Corinne's affliction, and a healing session was scheduled for the following night.

Deciding that he would need some help in this endeavor, Rolling Thunder invited me, my friends (who had driven to Carlin a few days earlier), and his "spiritual warriors" to enter his *wickiup* or sweat lodge. The *wickiup* had been constructed of saplings bent and tied together. Animal hides were draped over them, providing no vent through which air could escape. A shallow pit lay in the center of the earth, and was filled with red-hot rocks. As Rolling Thunder sang, chanted, and prayed, he slowly poured a dipper of water over the rocks. Waves of intense heat enveloped our naked bodies.

We took turns adding water and the heat increased until I thought that my skin was on fire. With every breath, I felt as if my lungs were being scorched. I felt that I was going to pass out, and had to take care that I did not fall on the sizzling rocks. Finally, I realized that I could not fight the heat—my best recourse was to receive the heat and ride with it. I tried to become one with the hot air and allowed every breath I took to enhance this concord. Before long, this feeling seemed to extend to our group, the rocks, and to

the universe itself. As the sweat poured from my body, I felt purged of anxiety, misery, and all the petty concerns that would limit my participation in the forthcoming healing session.

Our group emerged from the *wickiup*, washed ourselves with a nearby hose, put our clothes back on, and accompanied Rolling Thunder to a campfire where Corinne was sitting expectantly in a comfortable chair. To the sound of drums, we danced around the fire several times while Rolling Thunder conducted his healing ritual, using an eagle claw and feathers in the process. After the ceremony, Corinne slept late into the next day. Once she awakened, she never complained of gall bladder discomfort again.

Rolling Thunder told me that the eagle was his totem and that he occasionally transformed himself into one to fly over the nearby landscape, looking for medicinal plants. Following a series of dreams pertinent to the topic, I realized that I had at least two totems, or "power animals." One was the deer; I had been introduced to its power during my summer camp experience in Wisconsin. Another was the South American puma. As a child, I enjoyed playing "Animal Bingo" with my sister and our neighborhood friends. Instead of numbers, the Bingo cards were decorated with animal pictures, as was the wheel central to the game. We took turns spinning the wheel, and when it stopped we covered the animal's picture if it appeared on our card. The picture of the puma fascinated me, as it seemed to be jumping out from the wheel and the card. Invariably, it seemed to bring me luck when it appeared on my card.

In the years to come, I encountered other deer and puma in magazines, in films, in zoos, and other places. Their fortuitous appearance seemed to coincide with auspicious events in my life. Using mental imagery techniques, I would draw upon the agility and grace of Deer, or the strength and the wildness of Puma, when it was necessary. The memory of my *wickiup* experience has been a constant reminder of this Native American wisdom. When people hear that I have been given a Native American name ("Wicasa Waste," Lakota Sioux for "Good Man"), they sometimes ask me if I have a power animal; I am always honored to introduce them to Puma and Deer.



## Jesus in Recife

HAVING ATTENDED Lutheran and Presbyterian Sunday School services as a child, I grew up imbued with Biblical accounts of Jesus' miracles as well as the knowledge of his parables. The Protestant Bible does not include the books from the *Apocrypha*, so I had to wait many years before I discovered one of my favorite sayings attributed to Jesus. The *Acts of John* contains the passage, "And if you would understand what I am, know this: all that I have said I have uttered playfully, and I was no means ashamed thereby. I danced." Perhaps Jesus was (and still is) a trickster!

During my years in New York City, I brought my tourist friends to the Museum of Contemporary Art in midtown Manhattan to see several spectacular paintings by Salvador Dali, including "The Last Supper." In it, a diaphanous, blue-eyed Jesus is preparing the sacrament for his disciples, while dream-like figures float in and out of the background. I bought several small reproductions of this painting, and used them as foci for meditation. One afternoon, after spending nearly an hour in the stillness, I lost my sense of identity and felt a merging with Jesus. These transpersonal moments did not last for long, but I desired to repeat them. It was curious that I could not enter into this union by staring directly at the image of Christ. I needed to put myself into "Christ Consciousness," feeling compassion for the suffering, forgiving my antagonists, vowing to work for peace and justice.

Even then, I needed to take one additional step: I found that I had to look obliquely rather than directly at Jesus' image. My interpretation of this phenomenon was that the unitive experience was not as important as the "lived Christ," the daily dance in which one learns to follow the Great Commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," or "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." Those who follow this commandment will find themselves, perhaps inadvertently, partaking in a transpersonal experience because, in my opinion, love can be defined as the extension of cognitive, emotional, and/or physical activity beyond oneself to facilitate the well-being of another person, persons, or entity.

On four occasions I have visited the Centro Espiritu in Recife, Brazil, a guest of Manoel

Rabelo Periera, better known as Pai ("Father") Ely. A former banker who answered his "call," Pai Ely is now a priest in both the Candomblé and Umbanda African-Brazilian traditions. The painting on the Centro's wall portrays Oxala, the Candomblé *orixa* (or god) of purity, as Jesus, and it never fails to inspire me. The syncretic Oxala/Jesus in a temple attended by poor people of color affirms my conviction that the basic Christian mission is to identify with the vulnerable, the alienated, and the marginalized, standing beside them in challenging situations, just as Jesus is said to have done two millennia ago.

Each *orixa* favors a particular day of the week, and for Oxala that day is Friday. Each *orixa* is identified with a particular color, and Oxala prefers white. Several Brazilian spiritual leaders insist that I am a "child" of Oxala, and so on Fridays I make a point of lighting a white candle, and using its flame for my morning meditation.

Of all the meditation techniques I have tried, I find focusing on a flame, while attending to my breathing, to be the most satisfying. The Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, used "fire" as a metaphor for "flux," a reminder that life is constant change, that we never step into the same river twice, and that all "truth" is subject to shifting meanings. Heraclitus anticipated the literary technique of deconstruction—his "fire" is the active principle of deconstruction, which, finally and brilliantly, deconstructs itself (Haxton, 2001, p. xiv).

These are the musings that flicker in and out of my awareness during meditation. Rather than focusing on them, I simply try to release each thought and let it pass. But when I douse my candle and bring the meditation to a temporary closure, I realize that these are the messages that Jesus, Oxala, and Heraclitus constantly inspire me to incarnate.

## Ayahuasca in the Rain Forest

ONE OF the many anomalies I have encountered in my study of shamanism is the complex brew known as *ayahuasca*, *yage*, and by many other names, depending on the part of the Amazon in which it is used (Polari, 1984; Shannon, 2001). Some tribes attribute humanity's knowledge of the beverage to contact with subaquatic beings, others to the intervention of giant serpents, and others to messages from the

plants themselves. Jeremy Narby (1998) comments:

Here are people without electron microscopes who choose, among 80,000 Amazonian plant species, the leaves of a bush containing...a brain hormone, which they combine with a vine containing substances that activate an enzyme of the digestive tract, which would otherwise block the effect. And they do this to modify their consciousness. It is as if they knew about the molecular properties of plants and the art of combining them. (p. 11)

This beverage has become the sacrament of three syncretic Brazilian religious groups, the best known of which is Santo Daime (i.e., "Give Me Health").

In 1996 I participated in an international conference on transpersonal psychology in Manaus, Brazil. Although not an official part of the conference, an ayahuasca session was scheduled at a local Santo Daime church. Having partaken of ayahuasca several times earlier, I was motivated to attend the event because a friend of mine was eager to have his initial experience with this "vine of the souls."

Shortly after I drank the *daime*, I had a series of intense images. In my imagery, I had wandered away from the church setting, walking deeply into the rain forest. An exuberant child ran up to me, claiming that he had just seen some goddesses; no, not just one, but three of them. I was eager to check out his story, so I continued my trek, even though the trail had disappeared. I was not disappointed: I saw three silver tents in a clearing, and walked up to the first one.

Much to my surprise, Aphrodite opened the tent flap and invited me in. Her entire form gave off light, her light blue gown was incandescent, and her features and form were incredibly dazzling. Aphrodite looked directly into my eyes. I approached her, and our embrace brought ecstasy to my loins and tears to my eyes. I stroked her inner legs, working my way up her thighs, making firm circles with my fingertips. I recall removing a jewel in her navel, so that I could kiss her tight belly. Before the Greeks adopted her, Aphrodite was a Phoenician fertility goddess, but it seems as if I had caught her between pregnancies. I later recalled that she had been born from the sperm of Poseidon, or from the severed genitals of Uranus, depending on which

tale one finds more appealing. On this night, it little mattered; to cite one account, "from her gleaming fair hair to her silvery feet, everything about her was pure charm and harmony" (Guirand, 1959, p. 131).

Suddenly, I was standing in front of a different pavilion. This time it was the Norse goddess Freyja who beckoned me in. Half my ancestry is Norwegian, so I felt at home. Freyja was dressed in tawny tan furs and I remarked that they must be too hot for the jungle setting. With a giggle, she doffed them, standing before me in her naked elegance. I drew her to me, pressing my hands against her back, massaging her spine from her neck to her coccyx. She drew me to her couch, and again I felt a joining of psyche and flesh. I admired her gleaming gold necklace, and later was surprised to read that she had slept with four dwarves to obtain it. For this act, Loki, the Norse trickster god, called her a whore, but I was more forgiving, knowing that this was simply the nature of a love goddess whose "beauty is unmatched" (Bjarnadottir & Kremer, 2000, p. 157).

Soon after, I was in a third tent, that of Erzulie the voodoo (or "voodoo") goddess of sexuality, fertility, and love. Her exquisite blackness enveloped me as I fondled her breasts, opening her heart by moving my hands up and down her breastbone, then gently stroking her vulva. Dressed magnificently in the violet and fuschia colors of the tropics, Erzulie's hair was bedecked with the exotic flowers I had seen on her island of Haiti when I was there in 1980. From that visit, I knew that Erzulie gives herself completely to each relationship, but soon is discarded, becoming "the tragic mistress" of voodoo (Deren, 1970). I decided that she would not be mistreated this time; she would always be a treasured part of me, and that I would forever recall our union with fondness. When I opened my eyes, I found many of the neophytes around me in great discomfort, running to a nearby tree to vomit, returning to their bench, but soon running back to puke again. For me, my bodily sensations were sensuous and delicious, the aftermath of my transpersonal mergers.

Aphrodite. Freyja. Erzulie. Each goddess had provided me with insight and knowledge. I knew that they were, at some level, a part of myself, but for them to take on independent forms filled me with astonishment. They were also Divine

Mistresses, Kundalini Shaktis, Jungian anima archetypes, even manifestations of the Holy Spirit. All of them had invited me into their tents. Lawrence Edwards (2000) points out that this is a common way for union with the Divine to express itself—in several traditions sexual merging represents the highest form of worship. Upon reflection, I recalled that these love goddesses also represent fertility and assist during childbirth, when a baby walks through the door of a new existence. With a start, I realized that these latter two functions represented not only my Norwegian but also my German and Northern Irish heritage; “Krippner” translates into “crib-maker,” while my Irish forbears were named “Porter,” which translates into “doorkeepers.”

Jenny Wade (2000) has conducted a brilliant series of phenomenological inquiries into the relationship of sex and spirituality. Her conclusion is that sexual experiences can lead to “genuine transcendence and integrated, embodied spirituality” (p. 103). In addition to the Taoist, Tantric, and Judaic traditions that are deliberately designed for this purpose, as many as one out of twenty people seem to have spontaneous involuntary, nonordinary experiences while making love, regardless of their own beliefs and the mores of their societies. Atheists are included in this company, as well (p. 104). My own experiences support Wade’s reports (besides my report of the goddesses, you’ll simply have to take my word for it). I agree with her conclusion that “sex can take people to the same realms as trance, meditation, [and] drugs” (p. 120). Such experiences are possible despite the tendency of many religious groups to dismiss sex—at best—as a “lower” form of spiritual practice, and—at worst—as a hazard to spiritual transcendence.

### **Treading Sacred Sites**

**I**N 1997, one of my Muslim students at Saybrook Graduate School invited me to visit him in Israel. I was able to see the tomb of Moses Maimonides, after whom the medical center in Brooklyn was named, where I had worked for a decade (Ullman & Krippner, with Vaughan, 1989). We also visited the sites in Jerusalem associated with Jesus’ burial and resurrection. I visited the Holy Sepulchre revered by the Eastern Orthodox, Coptic, and Roman Catholic churches

and saw the Garden Tomb venerated by the Protestants. I trod upon sacred soil near other sites as well: the Dome of the Rock, the Via Dolorosa, and the Wailing Wall. On other trips, I left my footprints on Machu Picchu, Delphi, Glastonbury, Stonehenge, Borobudur, Tiahuaneco, the banks of the Ganges River, Mount Tamalpais, and such shrines as those dedicated to Fatima, our Lady of Lourdes, and the Virgin of Guadalupe. I was awed by the massive Meso-American and Egyptian pyramids, as well as the smaller pyramids of Ecuador.

D. H. Lawrence (1923) wrote about “the spirit of place,” noting that every group of people seems to be “polarized” in some particular locality. This pursuit of a “spiritual home base” provided the framework for my 1994 tour of sacred sites in Cornwall, England, where my host was Paul Devereux, director of the Dragon Project, an organization devoted to studying the purported energetic phenomena of these locations. Carn Ingli (or “the peak of angels”) was one spot on our itinerary. Its jagged peak in the Preseli ridge makes it a prominent landmark, one where countless passersby claim to have experienced “vibrations,” “emanations,” and “sensations of energy.” Ancient people draped it with necklaces, and, in the sixth century, St. Brynach claimed to speak with angels there. After a journalist reported that his compass behaved erratically at Carn Ingli, Devereux and his group detected full compass deflections on some of the rock surfaces as well as in midair. Checks with other peaks along the Preseli ridge did not produce similar findings (Devereux, Steele, & Kubrin, 1989).

Although I suspected that the power of suggestion was at work, Devereux explained that magnetic rocks that form Carn Ingli contain enough iron to produce a discernable effect. He also told me that there was evidence that the megalith builders made specific use of magnetic stones in the construction of some of their sacred monuments. A member of his group urged me to situate myself near to Carn Ingli to “feel the vibrations.” However, neither the power of suggestion nor the magnetic rocks themselves were enough to give me an “energetic” experience.

Some years earlier, I visited Chichén Itzá, a Toltec-Mayan site in central Yucatan. I joined a procession of tourists for a tour of the Castillo pyramid at that site. The passageway was very



narrow, and the ceiling was quite low. About halfway to our destination, I was overcome by an attack of claustrophobia unlike anything I had experienced previously. I had shortness of breath, was sweating profusely, and had trouble moving my body. Not wanting to impede the journey of the others, I turned around and worked my way back. Surprisingly, I had no trouble exiting from the passageway. Nor had I experienced insurmountable problems in other pyramid interiors or when spelunking in a small Illinois cave. One of my Mexican friends reminded me of the legendary Mayan king, still said to be hiding underground at Chichén Itzá, and suggested that he may have been playing a joke on me. Those tricksters. One finds them everywhere!

More memorable was the time I spent in Lascaux in 1997. Our group was allowed only thirty-five minutes to tour the cavern and appreciate its 17,000-year-old images; even so, it would take the cave's atmosphere several hours to recuperate from our intrusion. It did not take long for the raw power of the wild horses, antlered reindeer, and massive bison to envelop me. The cave's surface brings a three-dimensionality to the paintings; a naturally-formed hole provides the eye for one animal and a bulging rock becomes the shoulder for another. Inevitably, I found myself slipping into the consciousness of those painters from the Upper Paleolithic. However, I received no clear-cut message. Were they executing a ritual to insure success in the hunt? Were these incredible beasts the tribe's spirit guides? Did the images symbolize the power of the tribe and serve magical purposes? Then, in my fantasy, I sensed that the experience of these early humans was direct and immediate; the paintings may have provided a narrative of this experience. Sometimes grazing deer are simply grazing deer. I hesitate to use the term "art" to describe these marvels; "art" implies something cut off from direct experience, a form that is sacralized or commercialized. There was nothing detached about the Lascaux creatures; they seemed as vibrant at that moment as they must have been during their creation.

The contemporary architect who most directly addressed "spirit of place" was the Wisconsin architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who I had the

fortune to encounter several times during his long life and tumultuous career. Wright carried on an ongoing dialogue with the hills and valleys of Wisconsin, as well as with the mountains and deserts of Arizona, his winter home. In 1952, I introduced him to the student body at the University of Wisconsin, and later visited both his schools. He talked (and wrote) about helping people "break out of the box," which he saw as the architectural prison of the past, and advocated using natural, local materials when implementing his "organic architecture."

It was customary for students on the organizing committee to have a private discussion session with guest speakers following their address in the Wisconsin Union Theater. Wright had a well-deserved reputation for being flamboyant and irascible, and his repartee reinforced his image. But one response triggered one of the most consciousness-expanding experiences of my life, clearly superior to anything associated with so-called "mind-manifesting" drugs. The Korean War was raging overseas, and many students feared that they would be drafted once they graduated from the university. One student told Wright about his dilemma; he considered himself a patriotic American, but he was not in favor of war as a means of resolving international disputes. He asked Wright, "What should I do if I am drafted?" Without a moment's hesitation, Wright threw back his mane of white hair, looked the student directly in the eye, and counseled, "Don't go!" The student queried, "What do you mean? I would have to go." Wright continued, "You are limiting your options. Tell your draft board you are a pacifist. Move to another country. You could even spend time in jail. But don't go to war." The student group was stunned. Another question was asked, but I did not hear it. I had been reading books about existentialism, and with his remark, Wright taught me that our existential choices often are wider than we think. Later, I put this insight to work when I helped objectors to the Vietnam War brainstorm their options, even coaching some young men who successfully convinced their draft boards that they were unsuitable for military service because of their alleged sexual orientation or their assumed drug habits.

## As the Wheel Turns

IN EARLY 2001, my wife filed for divorce and our marriage of thirty-five years came to an end. For solace, I meditated frequently and, in April, evoked an image of myself falling into the arms of a tall, noble, compassionate Buddha. Later, I realized this was the 180-foot-high Bamiyan Buddha. Having stood for 1,600 years, it and another Buddha were destroyed by Afghanistan's Taliban regime in a twenty-day assault. For centuries, these Buddhas had observed the advent and decay of many cultures. When I contemplated the scene, using my imagination to move into the flaming red-black glow of the missile's destruction, I realized that everything has its moment. The art of ancient traditions and the bizarreness of extremist religions, much less the thirty-five years I spent with my wife, are all impermanent. Like it or not, flux is our very nature; knowing this, somewhere the Buddha was laughing while his image was being destroyed. As Thich Nhat Hanh (1999) observed, "Wherever and whenever there is mindfulness, true presence, compassion, and understanding, Buddha is there" (p. 153). Paintings, statues, and the like are simply reminders.

The Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar claimed that he had discovered his destiny in a dream, in which God called him to save his country from the contentious warlords fighting for control of Afghanistan. A movement was born, in Omar's words, as "a simple band of dedicated youths determined to establish the laws of God on Earth and prepared to sacrifice everything in pursuit of that goal." Dreams and visions can inspire villains and heroes alike, as can apparently synchronous events. In their remarkable book, *Synchronicity: Science, Myth, and the Trickster*, Allan Combs and Mark Holland (1990) tell how both Winston Churchill and Adolf Hitler reported remarkable coincidences that saved their lives. Had it not been for some unaccountable external event matching an internal image or goal (Jung's description of "synchronicity"), history would have been much different. Placing synchronicities into the framework of "chaotic attractors," echoing the *Book of Job* and its message, Combs and Holland suggest that the universe is fraught with the unexpected and the unforeseeable. Hence, "its

purpose cannot in the end be grasped with the rational mind. It must be lived with one's whole being" (p. 144).

In addition to my professional work with dreams, these nightly visitations have provided me with some of my own synchronous experiences. Perhaps once a year, I will recall a dream featuring an actor to whom I have paid little attention in my waking thoughts. Nevertheless, during the day I will run across the actor's name in a newspaper or flip the television channel to a film in which he or she starred, or a talk show on which the actor is being interviewed. These synchronicities are what some parapsychologists would label "trivial," but others I have had are more likely to be labeled "terrible."

In 1984, while attending a parapsychological conference in Mexico City, I dreamed that I had arrived at the ranch of Mickey Hart, the celebrated percussionist who had introduced me to Rolling Thunder. In my dream, Rolling Thunder and his friends were leaving the ranch in their station wagon. Rolling Thunder had a somber expression on his face, as did the other members of his entourage. I asked, "Where is Spotted Fawn?" Rolling Thunder turned his head slightly toward the back of the vehicle, where I saw a wooden coffin strapped to the floor. I knew that it contained the earthly remains of his beloved wife, my dear friend Spotted Fawn.

I awakened, wrote down a few words to remind me of the dream, and went back to sleep. As I was waking up that morning, I heard Spotted Fawn's voice speaking to me: "You know, I won't be seeing you anymore." Upon returning to the United States, I learned that Spotted Fawn had passed away that very night. I had spent considerable time with Spotted Fawn in the San Francisco hospital where she was being treated for cancer, so her death was not unexpected. Nevertheless, the synchronous timing of my dream with her passing made this a poignant anomalous experience. It was also an EHE, in that it motivated me to bring closure to my interactions with friends who are seriously ill, not knowing if my current visit, letter, or phone conversation will be our last.

Many people want to know my perspective on "spirits," and I simply express my open-mindedness. I define "spirits" as alleged entities, characterized by an identity and personality

traits, that can make themselves known (visually, verbally, kinesthetically, etc.) to human beings but do not share their time and space constraints. Their number includes spirits of the dead, nature spirits, deities, angels, demons, and many others. When I heard the voice of Spotted Fawn, it might have been that of her “spirit.” Years later, when I went back to my parents’ farm for my father’s funeral, I stayed in the room I had occupied as a child. I dreamed that my father instructed me to open a small drawer in a desk that I had used decades ago. Upon awakening I did this, and found a photograph of my father and his high school basketball team. Was this cherished memento brought to my attention by a “spirit,” or simply by the elicitation of a forgotten memory? I have had other provocative contacts with “spirits” that have a variety of explanations as well. In the meantime, I often answer questions on the topic by stating, “I am open-minded about almost everything, but I am skeptical about it all.” In the meantime, such experiences reinforce my habit of recording the dreams that I recall in a notebook, and reviewing them to determine what I can learn from these nighttime visitations.

“Dreams” and “dreaming” are two different events. The latter term describes an experience that occurs several times during the course of a night’s sleep. The former term describes whatever can be brought back and remembered from that experience. The dream report is never quite the same as the experience of dreaming, and human error can make it quite different. Language and memory are simply not up to the task of making a direct translation. The process of dreaming seems to be essential for a person’s health and equilibrium, even if a dream report is rarely given. There may be an analogy between reports of transpersonal experiences and the data indicating an unusual pattern of brain activity that accompanies reports of transpersonal experience. In their book *Why God Won’t Go Away*, Andrew Newberg, Eugene d’Aquili, and Vince Rause (2001) describe a chain of neurological events that are associated with some Buddhists’ reports of “unison with the universe” and some Christian meditators’ experience of “unity with Jesus.”

There is an area near the back of the brain that constantly calculates a person’s spatial orientation, the sense of where one’s body ends and the external world begins. This region

becomes inactive during transpersonal experiences, producing a blurring of the self-other relationship. Newberg and his colleagues conclude, “Our minds are drawn by the intuition of this deeper reality, this utter sense of oneness, where suffering vanishes and all desires are at peace” (p. 172). The process of prayer or contemplation may trigger the neural reaction, but, once evoked, the neurological chain may deepen the transpersonal experience. In any event, these authors observe that the taste of apple pie may have brain wave correlates or even be stimulated by probing brain tissue, but that does not mean the pie is not tasty or real.

The Buddhist concept of *anatta*, or “no-self,” refers to the conditioned responses that need to be restrained if one is to develop spiritually and live without self-inflicted suffering. But Buddhists, in general, do not deny that there is an enduring individuality, even though it is constantly changing both in this world and (according to some writers) in other worlds. The early Buddhist commentator, Buddhaghosa, likens the situation to the turning of a wheel. When the wheel touches the ground, it generates a conditioned personality state on that occasion, but the wheel itself is enduring and is not reducible to the moments of its contact. Transpersonal experiences represent a return to the wheel itself, rather than a focus on the occasions when it treads the ground.

On planet earth, we take our places and carry our banners in one festive parade or another. If we are lucky, from time to time, we are caught up in the exuberance of that parade, forget the banner we are carrying, and remember that our true home is the wheel, not its contact with the earth. Other images that come to mind are the raindrop, which maintains its separation only until it hits the earth, and the wave that is discernable for a moment and then rejoins the ocean.

On the other hand, there is a tendency of some avid practitioners of prayer and meditation to avoid or prematurely transcend developmental tasks, basic human needs, and conflicting feelings, retreating into what John Welwood (2001) calls “spiritual bypassing.” These people avoid confronting important issues in their lives by creating “new spiritual identities” that are simply the repackaged dysfunctional identities from which they sought an escape.



## Lessons from the Paleolithic

MOST HUMAN cultures believe in cosmic realms whose reality is commonly verified by means of experiences in alternative states of consciousness (Laughlin, 1994, p. 8). However, Morris Berman (2000), in his stunning book *Wandering God*, suggests that in Paleolithic times, human experience of the natural world was so intense that the environment seemed to “blaze”; he suggests that “heightened awareness” may be a more accurate description than “altered state” (p. 30). Berman continues:

The constant need of human beings in civilization to create ideologies, religious beliefs, political hierarchies, and the like, investing them with meaning...so as to feel mirrored, real, validated, part of some transcendent reality...does not (for the most part) appear in societies that value autonomy and mobility. (p. 168)

Sacred experience did exist in Paleolithic times but it was “a more horizontal spirituality” (p. 23). “The aliveness of the world is all that needs to be ‘worshipped’” (p. 188).

I agree with Berman that shamanism and the yearning to shift attentional states seem to occur most frequently among groups that have an intense community life, and that support individual identity (p. 79). I recall instances of Native American tribes who gave autonomy to their members to interpret their own dreams, and would even allow a child to report a dream that seemed to contain a message for the entire community. After all, Jesus once remarked that “God’s kingdom is within.”

I appreciate Berman’s assertion that “we have never cut the ‘cord’ connecting us to animal alertness because that cord is part of us and probably part of the circuitry of the brain” (p. 81). Berman writes of the days when he “had the sense of a Wandering God around me or within me, and every day was like a golden coin, as though I was out at the Great Barrier Reef” (p. 244). I have similar recollections of wandering alone in the swamp of my parents’ Wisconsin farm, finding surprise after surprise as a frog jumped before me, as a bird sang in the trees, or as a new wild flower bloomed where none had blossomed before. These exceptional human experiences taught me to revere the natural world, and resembled

Berman’s concept of “horizontal spirituality,” one with no hierarchy of either angelic beings or altered states. I am uncomfortable with the term “supernatural,” as it implies that an experience or an event is cut off from nature. Many Native Americans interact with spirits, plants, and animals in ways that seem “supernatural” to most Western observers. However, Native Americans believe that all of these exchanges are natural, and reject “supernatural” as a word that implies a distancing from Nature.

For me, the sacred text that most directly captures this ambience is the *Tao Te Ching*, supposedly written by Lao Tzu, a contemporary of Heraclitus, both of whom lived some half a millennium B.C.E. The eighty-one verses of the *Tao Te Ching* have a permanent place on my desk where they are accessible for either pleasure or for guidance. Its first verse can be translated to read, “There are ways, but the Way is uncharted; there are names, but not nature in words” (Blakney, 1955, p. 53). So none of the “ways” described by human beings is the “Master Way” by which nature really works. This is the insight that my 1961 psilocybin experience revealed when a cyclone appeared that whisked away a spiral of numbers, letters, and words.

This is the lesson also taught by general semantics, which I studied at the University of Wisconsin, when it points out that “the word is not the thing.” This is the circumstance that occurs during meditation when thoughts and concepts are dropped as I disappear into the candle flame before me. This lesson cannot be taught too often, because our culture consistently erects boundaries, constructs borders, and divides the world into neat (and sometimes overly meticulous) categories that allow us to go about our business in a more or less orderly way.

Taoism appears to have emerged, in part, from Chinese shamanism, and the similarities are still apparent. In much of the world, however, shamans were replaced by a priestly caste that presided over institutionalized religions, complete with dogmas, ceremonies, and prescribed behaviors. These “old religions” tended to be parochial, insisting that their tribe or nation consisted of “chosen people,” while the rest of humanity was in some way inferior. Unlike shamans, priests rarely entered alternative states of consciousness; they had no need to, as

they basked in revealed truth that needed no revision or supplement.

The religions that arose between the fifth century B.C.E. (when Lao Tzu, Zoroaster, and Siddhartha, who became the Buddha, lived) and the eighth century C.E. (the time of Mohammed) offered new perspectives on life and death. They were universalistic, postulating a God or abstract spiritual entity that presided over all humans, and not just a particular tribe or nation (Berman, 2000, p. 163). At their best, the “new religions” embrace all humanity, and respect the beliefs of those whose religious convictions may differ. At their worst, however, the “new religions” are just as dogmatic and divisive as many of the “old religions,” spreading discord while speaking of holy wars and crusades.

Barbara Ehrenreich (1997), in *Blood Rites*, her brilliant book on the origins and history of war, observes, “Whole societies may be swept up into a kind of ‘altered state’ marked by emotional intensity..., ecstasy..., and feelings...eerily similar to those normally aroused by religion” (pp. 13-15). Nothing pulls a group together like the appearance of an enemy; “in the face of danger, we need to cleave together, becoming a new, many-headed creature larger than our individual selves” (p. 82).

Indeed, transpersonal experience can be associated with war and depravity as well as with peace and love. A week at a Zen retreat, a weekend at a Hitler Youth rally, a night of sexual debauchery, or a day of wanton rape and butchery are all capable of producing experiences that would be classified as “transpersonal” by a dispassionate observer. Each could extend the experient’s sense of identity beyond its ordinary limits to encompass wider, broader, or deeper aspects of life or the cosmos.

As an avid reader of the books on transpersonal psychology by Ken Wilber (e.g., Wilber, 2000), I doubt that my own experiences would attain a very lofty height on his carefully sculptured hierarchy of “higher consciousness.” Yet, I credit him for his attempts to integrate the “three cultures” of science, morality, and art. His provocative books combine erudition with wit and intelligence, and make a case for including Spirit in one’s worldview. Wilber places shamanic states of consciousness at the “subtle” level of his consciousness spectrum, characterized by vibrant

mental imagery, both with form (e.g., “guiding spirits”) and without form (e.g., “white light”). Wilber grants that an occasional shaman broke into the “causal” realm of “pure awareness” and the “void,” but not until the advent of meditative disciplines was it possible for someone to attain “absolute” consciousness which experiences its “true nature.”

Along with his inattention to the varied scope of shamanic states, Wilber gives little consideration to the function of shamans (as opposed to those “yogis” and “mystics” who frequently attain “causal” and/or “absolute” consciousness). Shamans serve their communities, and this dimension is not recognized in Wilber’s hierarchy. I am not one to put much stock in hierarchies, but I would suggest the construction of a hierarchy of altruism. Because they serve their communities, shamans would have a higher rating on this scale than practitioners who spend their time accessing “higher consciousness” in retreats, in monasteries, and ashrams rather than in emergency rooms, battered women’s centers, soup kitchens, and hospices.

This devotion to service is linked with another aspect of shamanism, namely that of the trickster. Shamans employ, as allies, various tricksters, and sometimes play the role of a trickster themselves. Whether the trickster is a Native American raven, a crow, or a coyote, whether it is the Hermes of Greek mythology or the Exus of Brazilian Candomblé, the trickster jolts people out of their complacency. A personal disaster suddenly has unseen benefits; a cherished relationship inexplicably turns sour; a valued project falls apart. Sometimes another comes out of nowhere to take its place, but even if not, one’s complacency has been shattered. Transpersonal and anomalous experiences also contain a trickster element. They are basically “deconstructive,” to use a term from postmodern studies, in that they break down customary boundaries, classifications, and categories. Western culture is ultra-rational—it prefers sharp distinctions and clear borders. The parapsychologist George Hansen (2001) remarks that even our modern theory of communication is binary, and the term “bit” is shorthand for “binary digit” (p. 31).

While studying general semantics, I learned the folly of the “excluded middle,” the notion that there is no middle ground, no betwixt and

between. Hansen warns us that we do not eliminate the trickster simply by making sharp distinctions and clear categories. There is still a realm that lies betwixt and between the word and its referent, the signifier and the signified (p. 31). I believe the trickster is ubiquitous in anomalous experiences. It prevents parapsychological experiments from being replicated; it encourages psychiatrists to prescribe medication for patients who ask them about their "out-of-body" experiences; it causes academics to run in the other direction when a colleague suggests that the study of "past lives," "near-death" reports, or "alien abductions" might have some merit.

Anomalous and transpersonal experiences not only violate categories, they deconstruct and subvert them. When they lead to exceptional human experiences (EHEs), the result, according to White (1997), must be life-affirming rather than life-denying. For White, an EHE is embedded in a life-potentiating story that rings true to the experient as well as to others.

Because EHEs can be described either as "Peak in Darien" or as "fear and trembling," the term "vivid" experience has been proposed to cover both peak experiences and nadir experiences, both of which have the potential of becoming EHEs. The former description is attributed to Vasco Balboa's awe-inspiring experience upon seeing the Pacific Ocean from a small peak near the Gulf of Darien; the latter term describes episodes of hopelessness, despair, anguish, and desolation that, nonetheless, can be instructive (Margoshes & Litt, 1966). My first sighting of Mt. Everest (in Nepal) and my first glimpse of the Iguassu Falls (between Brazil and Argentina) were neither anomalous nor transpersonal. However, they were both peak experiences, and they were EHEs; during these outdoor encounters, I remember muttering to myself, "Nature never makes an esthetic mistake."

When captured Africans arrived in Brazil, they brought more than their *orixas*; the slaves remembered their dances, their songs, and their martial arts. They practiced the latter privately, waiting for the fortuitous time to fight for their freedom. Upon occasion, their slave-masters caught them engaging in these strange movements. The resourceful slaves claimed that they were rehearsing a dance; as a result, *capoeira*, the ubiquitous Brazilian martial art, was conceived and maintained in trickery. Today,

when it is performed by trained *capoeiristas*, its graceful, catlike movements constantly surprise its spectators, and probably its participants as well. Like a cat falling from a tree, the *capoeirista* lands on his or her feet; like a cat stalking its prey, a *capoeirista* is alert for any sound, smell, or movement that will facilitate an advantageous move. It should be no surprise that in addition to sprightly Deer, lithe Puma is my totem, or power animal. With one totem from North America and one from South America, I may have the hemisphere covered!

Late in 2001, I began external radiation treatment for prostate cancer. In addition to ingesting nutritional supplements and receiving "distant healing" from a bevy of devoted friends, I conducted daily mental imagery sessions, imagining Puma devouring the dead cancer cells following radiation and Deer bringing in reinforcements from my immune system to restore vitality to the healthy cells. This ordeal would definitely qualify as a nadir experience, but one that renewed my own personal mythology and its determination to bring what learning, love, and light I can into this world. A blood test taken when the radiation treatment ended indicated the success of the regimen, mainstream medicine supplemented by complementary procedures.

In 1946, Sister Teresa was traveling to Darjeeling, India, on a train. The young nun was "told by God" that her life's work was to recognize the divinity of the poorest of the poor, and to serve them with love. Later, as Mother Teresa, she won the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1996, half a century later, Yigal Amir, an Israeli law student also "heard God." Claiming to be following God's orders, he assassinated Yitzchak Rabin, another Nobel laureate. Did the same "God" speak to both? From my point of view, the former would be an exceptional human experience because it became life-affirming and life-potentiating, while the later, because it was life-denying, would not.

From my perspective, a compassionate God, one connected with community and characterized by caring, was present in Mother Teresa's experience, but the "God" who called for murder was a projection of the experient. This is only my point of view, and others will make different judgments. I view "evil" as the absence of God, as ignorance of the Divine, and as intolerable,



deliberate harm produced by culpable wrongdoing, but there are others who hold that evil is simply God's "shadow" or "other face."

I tend to refrain from being judgmental, but there are life conditions that require decisions. There are those who have abrogated their decision-making function to a dogma, a guru, or a religious leader. Yet, as I have learned by virtue of my extraordinary experiences, when we have any options that allow us choice, we are thrown back on ourselves to make the final decision. The selves we are thrown back upon may be social constructions, they may consist of conditioned responses, they may be our conduit to Spirit, or they may be the tip of a huge, unknown psychic iceberg, but they are all we have at our disposal when push comes to shove. Thus, like each weighty idea that I have reflected upon, this one ends in paradox. Nevertheless, I believe that people must be thought of as potentially mindful, responsible moral agents. Evil does exist in our world, and needs to be confronted if the parade of life on this planet is to continue. However, we must take care that we do not take a simplistic, naive position on this issue.

My old friend Alan Watts (1963) wrote that the concept of "evil" is profoundly problematic in a universe supposedly governed by a single God both beneficent and omnipotent. "This then is the paradox that the greater our ethical idealism, the darker is the shadow that we cast, and that ethical monotheism became, in attitude if not in theory, the world's most startling dualism" (p. 46). Watts was more comfortable with the *yin/yang* of Taoism, the conceptualization that in every *yin*, there is a little *yang*, and in every *yang* a little *yin*. The *Tao Te Ching* states, "Since the world points up beauty so much, there is ugliness too. If goodness is taken as goodness, wickedness enters as well" (Blakney, 1955, p. 54).

Watts divided people into "prickles" and "goos," but admitted that most people were either "prickly goos" or "gooey prickles." And the God that made most sense to Watts was a "two-handed God," a "hide-and-seek God," a "now you see Her, now you don't" God. "God" may be a word we use to describe transcendent trickery, the ultimate deconstructing of boundaries, and paradoxically the unifying of divisions. This is the God of fluidity, of change, of transcendence—the very Tao itself. Native Americans are perceptive when

they refer to God as a verb rather than a noun; a correct translation of "the Great Spirit" would read "the Great Spiriting."

These are the realizations that come to me during those extraordinary experiences that can be called "transpersonal." But these insights also emerge during nature walks, social encounters, playing games with children, making music, visiting art museums and sacred sites, and engaging in other experiences that are more exceptional than extraordinary. In the meantime, I do my best to imitate the Brazilian *capoeiristas*, connecting with my "animal alertness," happily dancing, though sometimes clumsily groping my way through life. All the while, I wait for a window of opportunity to make a move on behalf of intelligence, compassion, creativity, integrity, and the other values I hold dear.

Sometimes the dance calls out the trickster in me, and sometimes my dancing partners are tricksters themselves; sometimes I detect the trickster, sometimes I don't. Yet when the dance is over, and when I return to the cosmic wheel and the eternal sea, whatever part of me remains from my brief stay on planet earth will be grateful. It will be content that I once had the opportunity to carry a banner in a challenging, perplexing, often disheartening, but sometimes joyous, parade.

## Notes

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